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# DRAMATIC ACTUALITIES

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## **DRAMATIC ACTUALITIES**

*By the Same Author*

NOVELS :

- A BED OF ROSES  
THE CITY OF LIGHT  
ISRAEL KALISCH\*  
THE MAKING OF AN ENGLISH-  
MAN

MISCELLANEOUS :

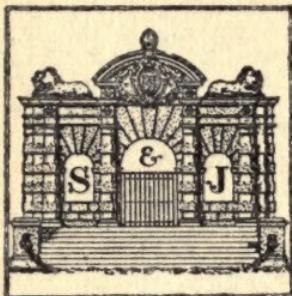
- WOMAN AND TO-MORROW  
*&c.*

\* Published in the U.S.A. under the title of "Until the Day Break."

# DRAMATIC ACTUALITIES

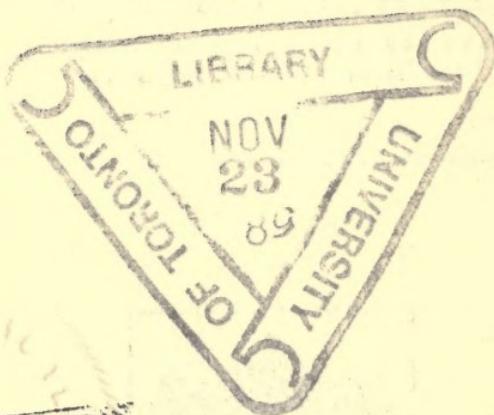
*By* W. L. GEORGE

AUTHOR OF "A BED OF ROSES,"  
"THE MAKING OF AN ENGLISHMAN,"  
*&c., &c.*



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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THESE essays have been published in the *English Review*, the *Fortnightly Review*, the *Independent Theatre-goer*, and the *British Review*. I am greatly indebted to the editors of these publications for leave to reprint.

W. L. G.

## **SOME DRAMATIC CRITERIA**



## SOME DRAMATIC CRITERIA

"On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the modern intellectual drama has failed. . . ."—J. M. SYNGE, Preface to "The Playboy of the Western World."

IT may be sophistry to say that everything is a matter of definition, or a convenient philosophy perhaps, just as it may be convenient philosophy to argue that evil is not absolute but relative. Yet this does not do away with the need for definitions, and the need is all the greater when the object is elusive. The word "intellectual" and the word "ideas" form a case in point. There are many intellectual plays and few plays with ideas, even though the jay often flaunt the peacock's tail. An intellectual play may be performed for profit, if its quality be properly concealed, but a play of ideas

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is of the damned. It is too much, however, to argue that every financial failure must necessarily contain the germ of some great truth; it is better to define the intellectual play as one cleverly written by a clever man, a play of ideas as one written by a nobody or a somebody, but for a purpose. A type of the former is "The Admirable Crichton," and of the latter such a play as "Mrs. Warren's Profession."

The ground being cleared and our views roughly adjusted, a remarkable fact comes to light. Not a single play of ideas has, during the last ten years, enjoyed as good a run as a Garrick Theatre failure. Most of these plays have not emerged from the sympathetic bosom of the Stage Society; a few have flashed meteoric through Terry's, the Savoy, or the Court Theatre, leaving the night darker behind them. In fact they have failed, for they have carried coals to Newcastle, taught the initiated. The public will have none of them, and prefers simpler

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fare; taken as a whole it shuns Mr. Shaw and Mr. Galsworthy: it prefers to crowd where mellifluous sounds usher in fair maidens. A small section, known as the elect, has discovered the serious drama, and pursued it through dreary matinées in obscure assembly halls, but it has never been so large as to interfere with the traffic in the Strand. This is no startling discovery, for many conscientious critics have for years been proving to their satisfaction the stupidity of the public which serious playwrights vainly try to serve. Bitterness is on them: they contrast the Briton with the Frenchman and the German, and wish that their lives had lain in happier climes. They resent the fact that London cannot be moved by the lever which stirs Berlin, and, indignantly proclaiming certain plays great, revile the people for whom they are too good.

Too good ! Therein, I believe, lies the key of the mystery. Are they too good ?

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## DRAMATIC ACTUALITIES

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A novelist, now famous, tells of a tale he wrote in his teens. It was rejected by eighteen periodicals, and then withdrawn by the author as being too good . . . but he came to think less of it later. The truth is that our plays of ideas are not too good for the public; taken as a whole they are too bad. They abound, they revel in defects; some of their authors think to find originality in the inversion of fact; others in impossibilism, most of them in obscurity. Naturally I do not charge the serious playwrights with having committed the seven cardinal sins of their craft: the aside, the soliloquy, impersonation, eavesdropping, confidences, the losing of papers, and the wrongful assumption of guilt. Their faults are more subtle, but none the less deadly. In fact it seems that, while clever playwrights have no ideas, men of ideas cannot write plays.

I do not want to scourge with scorpions the rosy body of musical comedy: it has

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suffered enough, rightly no doubt, and is none the worse for it; besides, I have not seen a musical comedy for five years. Nor do I wish to expose to the derision of our intellectuals the popular successes which so often excite their ire; mine is a more dangerous mission, for I wish to inquire why these popular successes are counterbalanced by such failures as those of Mr. Shaw, Mr. Galsworthy, and Mr. Granville Barker. I am no enemy of the drama of ideas: too often have my timid plaudits risen from the darkness of the pit in response to Mr. Granville Barker's melodious and other-worldly voice. But I must chastise my friends if I love them.

If such plays as "The Mollusc," "The Admirable Crichton," "Mrs. Gorringe's Necklace" were successful, it is neither because their teaching was esoteric nor because they were superficial: it is merely because they were well built, logical, human, and joyous, whilst "Strife" was gloomy

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and cruel, and "Getting Married" not a play at all. Most of our plays of ideas are incomplete; they avoid action, they are mere skeletons. Now a scientific friend of mine once showed me the skull of an Italian and told me that it was æsthetically perfect. This may or may not have been true, but the skull was ugly and uninspiring, and, mark this well, more remote from life than the lilies and roses that bloom on the cheeks of a dairymaid. The intellectuals have given us the dry bones of thought, and are surprised because we cannot assimilate this peculiar fare. The plays of ideas have failed because they are mostly bad plays, foreign to life, unsympathetic, artificial. In fact, they are never so artificial as when they are realistic, for the cold intellectual light which takes no account of prejudices, traditions, sentiment, distorts everything it touches.

If our intellectual playwrights have avoided the seven cardinal sins they have

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conjured up as many devils as they cast out. It is extremely difficult to class defects if one wishes to cover much ground, for the canons that govern a curtain-raiser do not apply to a three or four act play. Yet I submit, with that reservation, that our playwrights of ideas are as a body guilty of ten crimes: the shadowy plot, the play without a climax, hypertrophy of the atmosphere, sentiment (sometimes), garrulosity, the exaggerated type, inveterate gloom (sometimes optimism), obscurity, length, and shapeless purpose.

The shadowy plot is exemplified by the tableau form. A dazzling instance is Lady Bell's "The Way the Money Goes." One-third of the play is given over to a general tableau of life in a Northern town; another third is devoted to another tableau where vague things happen towards no obvious end. It is worth noting, by the way, that the stage is cut in two to show simultaneous action in two households. Such an error

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in stagecraft is obvious if we reduce it *ad absurdum*; instead of two contiguous cottages, why not (1) the hero's flat in Jermyn Street, and (2) the villain's lair at Upper Tooting? I have seen this device used in "Picotin's Revenge" at the old Standard Music Hall, and the laughter of the audience was suggestive. Of this class, too, is Miss Elizabeth Robins's "Votes for Women," which lived by its one gorgeous tableau, the plot being inchoate. Of course "every picture tells a story," but the playwrights will surely not urge this saying against me, or claim that they are inspired by the cinema. This criticism also applies to "Chains" and to "Fanny's First Play," but the dramatic action is on the whole sustained.

And then "Magic"! I know that it is usual to make allowances for Mr. Chesterton, to look upon him as a privileged jester; but if his recent defence of miracles is to be taken seriously, we must accept that his play too is to be taken seriously. It is

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interesting, of course, but it is impossible to grant that it has a plot: A young man who goes mad because a conjurer puts out lights by "magic," a conjurer who neither takes the girl nor leaves her . . . these are not materials with which to build a drama. As for "The Tragedy of Pompey the Great," *nosey* it is merely a set of dissolving views.

Where the plot is not shadowy there are, however, other pitfalls to be avoided, and one of these is the temptation to eschew climaxes. It is not enough to botch a betrayal and to call the setting of it to right a climax; a climax should be natural and inevitable, and if our playwrights read Ibsen more they would perhaps agree. This does not apply to "The Way the Money Goes," where the climax is sound if a little forced; but what are we to think of such plays as Mr. Jerome's "The Passing of the First Floor Back"? I give it its full due of idealism; but what are we to think of the craft that dictates a series of inter-

*from*

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views between the heavenly messenger and imperfect humanity, a series where nothing happens save demi-godly blarneying? To make more complete the technical weakness of the play, the playwright causes essential action to occur behind the scenes, and confronts us with a reformed boarding-house whence the heavenly messenger migrates, presumably to carry the light from Bloomsbury to Notting Hill. And if Mr. Jerome also claims to have painted boarding-house life, then we must remember that Mr. Zangwill did it far more humanly in "Merely Mary Ann." The defects of "The Passing of the Third Floor Back" are not exactly those of Mr. Rann Kennedy's "Servant in the House," but here again all the action is hidden, hidden beyond discovery. The climax of "Change" is not a climax, but a tableau. It is not with climaxes as elusive as the end of a spiral staircase that one garners the laurels of "The Chinese Honeymoon." Conversely,

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where there are climaxes there should be no anticlimaxes. It may not be meet to quote Sir Arthur Pinero when dealing exclusively with the playwrights of ideas, but in "Mid-Channel" he tried and failed because, on every apparently triumphant reunion of the suffering couple, there followed the bathos of the impossible introduction of a lover. "The Madras House" has no climax, "Magic" none save in incoherence, and as regards "You Never Can Tell," I suppose it is recognized as an extravaganza.

I have charged the playwrights of ideas with shedding too obstinately the cold light of intellect on everyday life. Yet some of them suffer from sentimentality. "Esther Waters" reeks with it, while with Sir James Barrie it is chronic; in "What Every Woman Knows" it reaches its zenith. I presume that every woman knows that she is more essential to her husband than any other woman, not because he loves her (this is too much to ask), but because he is used

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to her. And therefore Sir James Barrie, having enlisted our pity for a woman who is as hard as nails, hurries her to a trumpery triumph over a villainous shadow. Mr. Fagan, in "The Earth," Mr. Besier in "Don," and Mr. Arnold Bennett in "What the Public Wants," suffer in like manner. They wish to prove a fact or figure a state of society, and dazzle our eyes with the glare of footlights and tinsel. And what shall we say of Oscar Wilde? I have pursued his plays even to Putney Bridge, but have I gleaned from him anything but goody-goodyness, anything to justify his latest boom? Beyond "Salome," all his plays, "The Importance of Being Earnest," "Lady Windermere's Fan," "A Model Husband," "A Woman of no Importance," are feeble; "Ichabod" must be inscribed on them, for even their faultless construction does not justify the shedding of a stage tear.

Curiously enough, with sentimentality often goes good atmosphere. We want

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good atmosphere, but one can buy gold too dear. The defect of the tableau is bound up in it too; thus "The Way the Money Goes" suffers also from inflated local colour, and, though I do not wish to quote foreign plays, Hauptmann's "The Weavers" is a type thereof. We find it in "The Tragedy of Nan," but Mr. Masefield is a fine playwright, and will do great work if he passes from the personal to the social field; there is no blemish on his reputation except the shapeless "Tragedy of Pompey the Great." At present he is a poet rather than a dramatist, but the author of "The Campden Wonder" is too delicate a psychologist to err when he attacks a big social idea. "Change," too, by Mr. J. O. Francis, excellent in its atmosphere, sacrifices action to depiction. Generally speaking, the foregoing defects are those of the tract, and those who offer the average man tracts are casting their bread upon the waters, as it invariably returns.

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## DRAMATIC ACTUALITIES

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The above criticisms of modern playwrights are as nothing by the side of my fifth complaint. Whoever has assisted at certain debauches where paradox, antithesis, and homily run riot, will agree that our leading intellectuals are carried away by their words, a torrent in spate, bursting the floodgates of every dramatic usage. Talk, talk, everlasting, contradictory, inconclusive and indefinite, perpetual logomachy, these are almost a qualification in modern serious drama. Our brain is bewildered, our reasoning power fuddled as we hurtle up and down in the blanket twitching in nimble hands. If there is a plot we forget it; we wonder what it is we are to believe or to condemn. And the master offender is Mr. Bernard Shaw. Now I am a keen admirer of his work, and have said so,\* but surely we are agreed that Mr. Shaw is abusing

\* "Le Théâtre et les Idées de George Bernard Shaw" (in collaboration with R. Lauzerte), *Pages Libres*, December 14, 1907.

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somewhat the freedom of the stage when he uses it as a platform for political and social harangues, as an arena for interminable debates. To some extent all his plays bear the mark of a plethoric vocabulary, though his early work, especially "Mrs. Warren's Profession," is as broad and as human as his last three or four plays are involved and overloaded with words. "Major Barbara" and "The Doctor's Dilemma" were the beginning of the end, unless the end is not yet, and Mr. Shaw intends to be as before, but "more so." The Undershaft gospel emerged clearly still, and something human, if whimsical, was there; in "The Doctor's Dilemma" we had in Dubedat's speeches a foretaste of the great development called "Getting Married." I went to "Getting Married" as I went to "Misalliance": one has to do these things. But, in the words of Mr. Wells's giant: "What's it all for?" Is there a moment of drama, a moment of stress and searching, an appeal for partisan-

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ship, in these random flights through the philosophies of the world? Talk, talk, no action. Is this what a silent, self-contained people such as the English will accept as a gospel? And if they do not accept it as a gospel, of what use is it, and is it not better to please without instructing than to bewilder? Even "*Man and Superman*" and its evocative truths are unfit for the apostolic succession of Diogenes, because the message is cumbered and overwhelmed by rhetoric.

"*Androcles and the Lion*" is much less burdened with words than these other plays of Mr. Shaw's, and though less original, much better drama, but "*Fanny's First Play*" suffers greatly from verbosity, while "*Creditors*," by Strindberg, "*Magic*," "*Change*," and especially Mr. Zangwill's "*The Next Religion*," contain an absolute debauch of talk. Mr. Zangwill's clerical hero is the worst; the playwright is skilful enough to break up the dia-

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logue, but the total of this dialogue is terrifying.

These criticisms apply to "The Passing of the First Floor Back," to "Mid-Channel," to "The Voysey Inheritance," to "The Madras House," and to "Waste." Mr. Granville Barker does not assist his splendid and subtle characterization, nor emphasize his points, by introducing interminable theoretical debates, by showing us a Cabinet in distress. All this talk means length, and unnecessary length. This is exemplified by "Man and Superman," which is usually performed in two sections, for even the elect cannot assimilate it at a single sitting. "Waste" suffers from the same disease, and I think that the craftsman in Mr. Barker could reduce (or suppress) the Cabinet scene.

These defects of length and loquaciousness have to a certain extent been recognized by the playwrights, and this perhaps unconsciously. Vaguely aware that action drags, they exaggerate their types, trans-

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form them into broad figures of farce or stage heroes. Ridgeon, Dubedat, Major Voysey, Ann, Tanner, are exaggerated and inhuman without being superhuman. Exaggeration runs riot, even in the fanatical local preacher of "The Gates of Morning," in "The Swayboat" and "Diana of Dobson's," in "The Charity That Began At Home." I include two plays performed by Miss Lena Ashwell's company without being quite convinced that they are plays of ideas, and it is not certain that her preference for plays where she is married, miserable, and misunderstood has not something to do with the exaggeration. This applies to the scarefoe, "An Englishman's Home," for we must respect opinions, but we cannot respect the over-broad drawing of its types. It is when we come to the Suffrage plays, produced during the last few years, that exaggeration attains high-water mark. Neither the playlets produced at the Scala nor Miss Netta Syrett's more ambitious

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attempt for Mr. Trench leave for a moment the region of farce. They are a loss to The Follies; if I were not a Suffragist they would suffice to drown my young enthusiasm in a sea of ridicule. "Pains and Penalties" must be classed with these, but it is hardly fair to criticize Mr. Housman on a public reading.

The alternative to farce, for farce is the common result of exaggeration, should not be gloom. Yet gloom is a characteristic of the serious drama. There is not a moment of joy, of life-lust, in "Justice," in "Waste," in "Rutherford and Son," in "Mid-Channel," even in such perfectly constructed works as "Strife" and "The Silver Box." Mr. John Galsworthy is beyond contest the leading British dramatist; bitterness and gloom alone can be counted him as faults; never does a ray of sunshine pierce through his night. Not even in "Joy" does he unbend: his young people are old. In "The Eldest Son" he is bitter

Gloom  
| Galsworthy

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to the core. Mr. Edward Garnett's "Breaking Point" is petrified pessimism: nothing constructive is born of his heroine's sorrows. Conversely, "What every Woman Knows" fails to persuade us that all will be well, for nothing in the play is logically well. Shand would not have strayed, or, if he strayed, would not have returned to the fold. Mr. Jerome's mystic lodger also leaves us sceptical as to his converts.

An optimistic play appeals, of course, to a broader public than a pessimistic, yet both fail if they be obscure. Obscurity is the foe of the playwright of ideas, for it often masquerades under the guise of subtlety. "Kathleen ni Houlihan" and "The Playboy of the Western World" barely escape the charge: both plays, especially the latter, reflect genius, but their meaning is esoteric, and is not easily apprehended by the untutored mind. Again, "Joy" has no moral save perhaps a pale egoism. As for "The Devil's Disciple" and "The Showing Up

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of Blanco Posnett," which run to some extent on the same lines of thought, can any comfort be extracted from diabolonian rhapsodies, or the unconvincing redemption of the erring cowboy? Perhaps, but it bears no message to me, the ordinary man, the man who must be reached if the sermon is to go home. And when we come to "The Marrying of Ann Leete," I find myself confronted with a blank wall. Subtle thought? Maybe, but am I subtle enough?

In a sense obscurity and shapeless purpose go hand in hand. The purposes of these plays are shapeless in so far as the plays are obscure. If "The Breaking-Point" is shapeless, then it reads no lesson, and what are we to think of Mr. McEvoy's "All that Matters" or even "David Ballard"? Can a clerk rise to the empyrean, or must he be dragged back, say, to Mincing Lane? The dramatist tells us nothing. And are we to believe in the humanizing of Captain Brassbound? We cannot, even

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with a Shavian grain of salt. Likewise "Civil War," Mr. Ashley Duke's firstling, teaches us nothing. When the people have no vision they die, and, surely, Lazarus will not rise if he understand not the command.

I do not suppose that vision or command can come out of "Magic," "The Next Religion," or "Androcles and the Lion," in spite of their spiritual strain. We need a crisper sensation than we gain from a declaration that we ought to believe without inquiry; we merely say "Why?" Mr. Zangwill also does nothing for us; he gives us a dogma and a ritual for a dogma and a ritual. "You come into my library; you put at the top the books which are at the bottom; at the bottom those which are at the top. . . ."

To cavil at that which is in the main artistic and well-intentioned is an ingrate task. Fortunately we have one great playwright in being, Mr. John Galsworthy, whose "Strife" and "Silver Box" are

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dramatically flawless. Their logic is proof against analysis. This cannot, perhaps, be said of "Mrs. Warren's Profession," "Cæsar and Cleopatra," and "John Bull's Other Island," but in each one Mr. Shaw's purpose emerges pellucid. Mr. Conrad gave us in "One Day More" the perfect one-act play, because inevitable in its development, and Mr. Fenn's "Convict on the Hearth" was good because true. "The Fountain" of Mr. Calderon also convinced me that charity was a sin, that both receiver and giver were accursed; in fact, it went home. "Chains" led one to hope a great deal from Miss Baker; while an almost perfect play is "The Cassilis Engagement." However, Mr. St. John Hankin let his pen run away with him in "The Charity That Began At Home." There is "A Man of Honour," too, but I almost despair of Mr. Maugham now that he has found out how to be idolized in six theatres at a time. It is good to observe, though, that in "Grace" Hankin

galsworthy - Macfield -  
Hankin - Bennett -  
Houghton - Shaw -

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there is much honesty and reality; it is unfortunate that his heroine's psychology is conventional and unconvincing. He has tried, too, in "Loaves and Fishes," and in "The Land of Promise."

It is impossible to say, within the compass of this essay, why these plays are good. Enough be it to accept, if my criticisms have any value, that they can plead "Not guilty" to the ten crimes. Even among this élite some escape but narrowly. "John Bull's Other Island" must be cautioned for discursiveness, "The Silver Box" for its trial scene, for that is rather a cheap effect, and Mr. Galsworthy shows in "Justice" that it tempts him perhaps overmuch. Yet we have in Mr. Galsworthy one great dramatist, and that is not given to every generation. As for the future, as Mr. St. John Hankin and Mr. Houghton are dead, there are two more men on whom to base hopes, leaving aside Mr. Shaw, on whom, as he might say, you must base no hopes,

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but he will realize them. They are Mr. Masefield and perhaps Mr. Arnold Bennett; neither has been stretched to his full compass. Mr. Masefield has proved himself a poet, and Mr. Bennett, in "What the Public Wants" and in "Cupid and Common Sense," has shown us that he has wit and yet knows how to build a play. Still if one of these men should attack a large social idea, in which case Mr. Bennett would have to risk the popularity and profits gained from "The Honeymoon" and "Milestones," there could be a fine play. One can say of them what Villemessant said of everybody: "*Tout homme a un article dans le ventre; il s'agit seulement de le faire sortir.*"

### STATEMENT

FOLLOWING on the publication of the foregoing essay in the *English Review*, Mr. Charles McEvoy contributed to the Fortnightly Review an essay entitled "The Law

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of Audiences," from which I extract the following passage:

"Mr. W. L. George, writing in a recent number of the *English Review*, makes this common plea for the ordinary man. This writer's careful analysis of practically every play in the list of modern dramas, and his theories as to the reason of their 'failure,' is typical of the false reasoning that prevails. Synge is too esoteric, Galsworthy is too gloomy and cruel, Shaw somewhat too abusive of the freedom of the stage in the matter of social harangue, Barker too prone to unnecessary talk, etc. All of which is to say that Mr. George has accepted as law the principle that an appeal to the ordinary public of to-day is the criterion of dramatic worth, and has forgotten the audiences for whom these authors have written, and to whom they have successfully appealed, whenever the co-relative principle has been in operation.

"Mr. George goes on to make the curious

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claim that he is representative of the ordinary man, the man who must be reached if the sermon is to go home. Mr. George as a self-tormenting æsthete has no more relation to the ordinary man than have a pair of Siamese twins, and one is at first inclined to regard his criticism as, after all, coming from the pen of one of the legitimate audience of the new drama—one who goes so far as to assert that the intellectuals are the ordinary men. But his article bears too many of those unpleasant jibes at the movement to be mistaken: ‘A small section, known as the elect, has discovered the serious drama, and pursued it through dreary matinées in obscure assembly halls, but it has never been so large as to interfere with the traffic in the Strand’; or again: ‘The public as a whole shuns Mr. Shaw and Mr. Galsworthy,’ as if it did not, as a whole, also shun Mr. Whistler and Mr. Meredith. But most surprising is Mr. George’s discovery of ‘the remarkable fact

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that not a single play of ideas has, during the last ten years, enjoyed as good a run as a Garrick Theatre failure.' This is one of the most vacuous statements ever made over a creditable signature. Nothing could mean less. A play is a play of ideas on individual opinion only, while the longevity of a 'Garrick,' or any other ordinary West-End failure, is involved entirely in a matter of managerial policy."

I embodied in the following essay, "**DRAMA FOR THE COMMON MAN,**" a reply in which I attempted to set forth fully the conditions a play of ideas must satisfy if it is to prove acceptable to the general public. I wished mainly to put forward the common man's case, and to show that he has right to ideas couched in an understandable and agreeable form.

# **DRAMA FOR THE COMMON MAN**



## DRAMA FOR THE COMMON MAN

“ Why should the Devil have all the good tunes ? ”  
ROWLAND HILL.

WHY should the intellectuals have all the intellectual plays ? I wonder how many, if any, of our serious dramatists have ever asked themselves this question, whether they have written their plays in mere blindness, as artists careless of what the public wants, or whether they have in magnificent aloofness decided to write only for the elect. I do not for a moment doubt that such men as Mr. Yeats, the late Mr. Synge, and perhaps Mr. Masefield, have written without regard for the box-office, but I can hardly believe that the seed of the hard-bitten bourgeoisie, such as Messrs. Shaw and Galsworthy, has adopted the aristocratic attitude. I think it safe to assume that there

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is hardly a dramatist who does not hope (sometimes against hope) to see his play run throughout the years in the wise of "Charley's Aunt." Such being the assumption, I propose to say, in a constructive spirit, what are, to the best of my knowledge, the conditions a play of ideas should fulfil if it is to satisfy those such as myself whom I will call the common men. By common man I wish to indicate in an unambiguous manner the class of person whom Mr. Granville Barker most unfortunately calls the "mean" man.

The desiderata I wish to suggest proceed largely from my destructive essay entitled "Some Dramatic Criteria," and from the incidental reply afforded me by Mr. McEvoy's "Law of Audiences." In "Some Dramatic Criteria" I dealt with the causes of the failure of the intellectual drama—*i.e.*, the almost continuous series of financial losses it has entailed upon its promoters—and ascribed these failures less to the

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## DRAMA FOR THE COMMON MAN

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stupidity of the public than to the inferiority of the plays. Mr. McEvoy, on the other hand, while taxing me with Philistinism and malevolent intentions towards the intellectual drama, lays down laws as to the production of serious plays, the logical outcome of which is that intellectual plays are for the intellectuals, that they must be performed by their own actors in places unfamiliar to the public, and be so under-advertised as practically to exclude the common man. In other words, Mr. McEvoy says: "China for the Chinese, and death to the foreign devils!"

I do not propose to answer him in a direct manner. Originally I dealt with the shortcomings of the serious play, and attempted to lay down ten "don'ts for dramatists," to indicate where errors had been committed and where the violation of theatrical traditions had brought disaster in its train. But as it may be argued that destructive criticism is useless by itself, which is partly

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true, I venture to outline the demands which we, the common men, make upon stage plays; indeed, I wish to be constructive, to figure so far as is possible the type of play we want.

The ordinary light play is, of course, not under discussion. We need light plays, such as "Toddles" and "The Man from Blankley's," musical comedy, and light opera, but I am not concerned with these, and do not want them myself, yet other men want them, and there is no reason why they should not have them. But, with many other common men, I want plays of ideas, and I want them in an acceptable form. The proposition that the common man should not be offered plays of ideas is egregious: if the drama is a social force we are no more entitled to refuse it to all the people than we are entitled to refuse them elementary education. If, therefore, it is accepted that we want good plays it is incumbent upon us to show that we will

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support them; I say that we will, on terms. There is room in England for serious drama. France, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Belgium, all support a number of serious dramatists, often in affluence and generally in comfort. There are large audiences for Brieux, Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, Björnson, Ibsen, Strindberg, Mirbeau, etc., audiences recruited among every class of the community, studious, note-taking, paying audiences. I submit that there are in this country equally large audiences in a latent condition. The play-going public lies as the Sleeping Beauty, and waits for the Fairy Prince who will one day ride through the forest.

Serious drama —

It will at once be argued by the pessimists that foreign audiences are more intelligent than our own, or at least that they are more interested in general questions. I do not believe it. It is true that the greater section of the British people prefers an evening in a picture palace to a performance

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of "The Pillars of Society," but there is another section, the very section which on the Continent supports the serious play. This cannot be proved in a direct manner any more than it can be proved that foreign audiences are interested solely in ideas and the manner of their presentation. It may very well be that foreign audiences look for salaciousness in "Maternité" and "Les Avariés," for revolutionary stimulation in "Beyond the Power of Man," etc., but if we assume that they take the serious drama seriously we must also assume that they take the light drama lightly, and here is the crux of the argument.

In all the discussions of the foreign stage I have ever read in English there has been an assumption that nothing matters abroad save the serious play; we have been led to believe that the bourgeoisie of Paris repairs to the Théâtre de l'Œuvre to applaud Socialist preaching and denunciations of family life and marriage, while the Viennese,

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on their way to the night cafés, are supposed to stop and, for three hours, witness in "The Weavers" the heartrending tyranny to which the working classes are subjected. Indeed, it is seriously contended that the foreigner is a serious being, and that we are in every way inferior to him. This is entirely untrue. The majority of French and Teutonic plays, the works of Pierre Veber, Georges Feydeau, Pierre Wolff, De Flers and De Caillavet, Courteline, Bernstein, Tristan Bernard, Alexander Engel, Lippischitz, Roda-Roda, Fulda, etc., all the *drames* and *comédies mondaines* and *opérettes* are light—light as the comedies in which Miss Marie Tempest chooses to appear. They deal with the doings of the smart set, the dissipation of the gilded foreign youth, the difficulties of matrimony, triangular or other, financial or monetary entanglements; their problems are not problems, but merely stories in play form, sketches of lives comic or tragic; they are concerned largely with

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such well-worn themes as that of the flighty wife who eventually turns to her good husband in the most approved "Walls of Jericho" style, or that of the woman compelled to choose between duty and love. They are well-built, shallow plays; there is not an idea to the square page in any of them. Side by side with them and the elementary thrills offered to the jaded by the Grand Guignol are British importations, such as "The Quaker Girl," a very successful play, and native light opera, such as "The Merry Widow" and "The Waltz Dream." All these attract enormous audiences; it cannot therefore be said that there is no public on the Continent for the ordinary play.

It is not even too much to affirm that the material upon which the Continental playwright has to draw is in the main very poor. After all the French and German bourgeois class differs very little from its British equivalent: the French middle-class is

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steady, unimaginative, thrifty, shrewd, and, so far as love is concerned, conventional and sordid; the German bourgeois, on the other hand, while equally conventional and sordid, suffers from the deflection of his imaginative capacity towards the brutishness of commerce. Taken in the mass they are closed to ideas, wedded to the established order of things, prudish in externals, and on the whole moral and religious in the stereotyped fashion of those whose sins of commission are few and sins of omission many. Given, then, that the playgoing public of the Continent does not essentially differ from our own, given that light plays are a success in every European capital, it follows that the Continental mind is not as a whole cast in a serious mould: all the Continent does is to supply a serious section. Reasoning, then, from the international similarity of the bourgeois, it is permissible to suggest that England also possesses a large section which might be gathered

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together for the permanent support of the intellectual drama. It is relevant to point out here that Greater London has a population treble that of Berlin and Vienna, and well over double that of Paris. Should, therefore, the pessimistic intellectual contend that the British people are in the main stupid, it can be conceded that there are three stupid Englishmen for every stupid German or Austrian, and even this act of generosity should leave us a public adequate for the support of serious plays.

Our serious section, however, is not made up of the three or four thousand members of London dramatic societies; if it were, the future of intellectual drama would be without hope. It must comprise a very large number of persons whose minds and souls are in states of development varying between that of the devotees of Shakespeare (the most facile of worships) and that of the audiences who attend and laugh at the lighter efforts of Mr. Bernard Shaw. That

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class is made up of many elements—“serious” clergymen, emancipated girls incited by the example of Vivie and Nora to “live their own lives,” middle-aged men and women who look upon novels as frivolous and think to rise in the mental scale by reading biography and memoirs, daughters of the bourgeoisie pining for novelty, young men fresh from the Universities and Training Colleges, etc. All these are more or less anxious to be educated, stimulated. They do not want the “ignoble,” as Mr. E. A. Baughan rightly summed up Mr. Hermann Bahr’s “The Fool and the Wise Man” (a plea for drunkenness and dissipation as a rule of life . . . leading to general paralysis), and Strindberg’s prejudiced, neurotic, and meanly vindictive “Creditors.” Strindberg has posthumously disgraced himself in his “Confession of a Fool,” which is naught but an act of revenge, and it is open to question whether the word “fool” should

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not be taken literally. The common men  
do not want mere hatefulness; they are not  
able to absorb the heavy fare of "The  
Madras House" or "Misalliance"; they  
cannot follow the esoterics of "The Playboy  
of the Western World": yet they are pro-  
foundly dissatisfied with the ordinary super-  
ficial play, they strain after something they  
suspect but do not know, stretch out their  
hands towards something they cannot  
describe. Inarticulate in their demand,  
they are not inarticulate in their condemnation;  
it is from them we hear the charges  
which are justly levelled at the intellectual  
drama; it is they who complain that it gives  
them no plots, that its climaxes do not  
thrill them, that its characters are soulless  
machines, that it smothers interest under a  
heavy, enveloping shroud of words. This  
is the cry of the common man, who knows  
only that he does not want the plays offered  
him by the intellectuals, and cannot say  
what he does want; but the time must

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inevitably come, either through realization of aim by a dramatist or by accident, when the common man will suddenly show by crowding to the box-office what it is he has been asking for.

I believe in the box-office test. It is the only test of a play, up to a point, just as the sale of a book is, also up to a point, an index of its value. I do not in any wise suggest that because a play has run five hundred nights or a book sold in a hundred thousand copies we must acclaim both as works of art; the contrary is usually the case. But, on the other hand, we must not assume that a play is good because it was taken off after a week's run, or a book noble because the first edition was remaindered. The truth of the test lies between the two positions: first-class work seldom fails completely or scores heavily; it has a fair success, no more. Thus, in the case of a play, sixty nights are a good test. Though this may appear a low figure, it is not too low,

by J. G.

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for one of the most successful intellectual plays of the last three years, "Justice," was, I believe, performed but twenty-five times. These sixty nights mean about fifty thousand persons, a far from impossible figure, given that (taking books as the only possible basis) the annual sales of our first dozen intellectual novelists are estimated at one hundred thousand a year, equal, through the libraries, to not less than a quarter million seriously minded readers. But the quarter million will not tolerate intellectual aristocracy; they wish to hear their language spoken and certain prejudices respected whilst others may be demolished. Above all they are profoundly interested in themselves.

A striking piece of evidence as to this fact lies in a recent happening in a house known to me. There is in the library one book whose popularity with the servants of the house has entirely eclipsed that of the light novels they are supposed to prefer. That

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book is "Esther Waters," which I, in common with, I believe, many others, consider to be a work of art. This discovery sheds a great deal of light upon the problem of popular demand; Mr. George Moore's work is an inspired piece of realism, devoid of romantic gloss, crude and unashamed; it is well built, logical, in every sense good, and yet, overcoming the puritanical prejudice which is rampant among the better-class servants, brushing aside the feminine liking for glamour, it establishes itself . . . and it establishes itself because of its poignant reality.

This is the demand of the common men, playgoers as well as novel readers. We want reality, reality in ideas, reality in situations, reality in persons; we do not want anything that is not reality. And as nothing is so unreal as intellectual realism, the common man has rejected the intellectual drama. I take it as accepted that the creatures of Messrs. Shaw, Barker, and

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their followers are mere types, specimens of synthetic humanity. They are not men and women as we know them, they are mere *épateurs de bourgeois*. The common man will have none of them; sheer intellect cannot "touch his great heart," but reality can do so. The central demand is for an anodyne, for a bribe, call it what you will. The common man will not take his ideas naked; they must be clothed, and clothed to his liking, failing which he will cast them aside as a petulant child throws down a toy. He does not know that he likes ideas; if he had this knowledge he would at once emerge from his class and enter that of the intellectuals, the qualification for which is capacity for knowing oneself—in other words, consciousness. Such as he is he is deeply suspicious of ideas; he fears and dislikes them, believes they will upset his comfortable satisfaction with the world, bring confusion into his beliefs and morals. Often he is merely bored. The

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common man must be cheated or coaxed, and if his view of reality is not that of the intellectual it is the latter who must give way. One of the main demands of the common man is for a light touch. He thinks, and rightly, that there is in life no unalloyed tragedy or comedy, just as there is no utterly happy or unhappy existence; he believes that merriment and tears, dignity and absurdity, generosity and self-glorification, whirl and intermingle in wild paradox. It is this unconscious instinct which fathered Shakespeare's clowns and the comic ostlers and servants of the melodrama. Moreover, it is a true vision. In ordinary life and in solemn moments somebody affords contrast, "relief": the joker weeps when he discovers that his victim suffers pain, the judge's wig sits awry and the law ceases to be majestic. It is therefore for relief I ask, bold "comic relief," as intellectual plays seldom suffer from over-funniness unless they are mere extrav-

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ganzas. The common man cannot for three hours submit to the grinding misery of "Justice," "The Silver Box," or "Waste," or "The Breaking Point"; his demand is for one of his familiar friends from the legitimate drama, the comic butler, the Colonel with a catchword, the widow who has seen better days. He wants them; he misses them! Why should he not have them? Why should he have to give everything and the intellectuals nothing in this intended compromise? Ideas are ideas, and nothing can destroy them; diluted they are ideas still, just as gold in dross is still gold. It is better to convey ideas in the Fabian manner than not to convey them at all, and they will not suffer in the process: one does not spoil the calomel because one coats the pill with sugar.

"Magic" is a case in point. It is not a good play; it is chaotic, irrelevant. Its message is not attuned to the times from the common man's point of view, who

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knows nothing of Christian Science, Higher Thought, Mental Science, of the mystical revival. "Magic" should have bored and bewildered the audience: it did not. Even though the common men thought the conjurer high-falutin, his miracles trumpery, his creed nonsense, they were charmed with the comic Duke, his subscriptions to the funds of the public-house reformers as well as to those of their opponents . . . so that there might be no ill-feeling. They delighted in the simple sweetness of the ridiculous old nobleman who thought a great deal might be said on both sides. They accepted the metaphysics, supported the play for three months, and sent it on tour, because with all this muddle of philosophy and infantile affectation Mr. Chesterton gave them something sincere, human, gay. For the sake of his wit and of his creation they *forgave* him his intellectual sins.

A much more remarkable instance of the success of light intellectual works is that of

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“Fanny’s First Play.” This is a fairly well-built drama, leaving out the episode of the critics which the common man does not understand, and it is as consistently stimulating as it is entertaining. It has been performed some six hundred times, and will be revived; its triumph follows on the comparative success of “You Never Can Tell,” “John Bull’s Other Island,” and “Arms and the Man,” on the utter failure of “The Philanderer” and “Widower’s Houses.” And the crowning fact is that “Man and Superman,” that somewhat indigestible work of genius, has at last filled the house because (*vide* Press) “it was played as a screaming farce.” Can a more illuminating commentary be imagined? It is obvious that treatment matters even more than ideas, and that, if the intellectuals give the common man what he wants, he will support them. I am told that if “Fanny’s First Play” has had so good a run it is because Mr. Shaw has allowed it,

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and that he has before now "taken off" many a successful play. I accept his statement, but would suggest that if he "took off" plays while they were in full swing it was because ultimate failure was in the air, and because he rightly preferred a retreat in good order to an eventual rout. If this had not been the case the Vedrenne-Barker management might still be in existence instead of having expired in the Strand. Mr. Arnold Bennett's play, "What the Public Wants," a work of some intellectual intention, also proved emphatically to be what the public wanted; it had the qualities the common man requires, for it was gay, and though it contained some ideas was human in its appeal. These two examples should go far to prove the theory I develop here, and to encourage towards compromise our over-serious dramatic persons.

Another, and a better, is supplied by "The Blindness of Virtue." Its author, Mr. Cosmo Hamilton, is not an intellectual

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playwright, and he certainly is no more than a sensational novelist, yet his play discussed in agreeable form the desirability of "telling" daughters. It created a controversy in the popular press; it agitated and usefully agitated ideas. "Milestones," too, though its success was largely due to its historical effects, very gravely turned the common man's mind towards the evanescence of all things; it pleaded for tolerance and sympathy; it did more than merely amuse. Intentions such as these were in "98.9," but they did not come out; subtler intentions were in Jacinto Benavente's "The Bias of the World." Mr. Shaw, in "Androcles and the Lion," was light, but too irrelevant. And in "The New Sin," a play the intellectual quality of which has been exaggerated, for its "social" portions were very obvious and very stale, Mr. Hastings managed to prick the social conscience, to make the common man who had seen "The New Sin" argue with the

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common man who had not. All these plays had social intentions, but they were more or less well built; they did not strain, but they stimulated the mind. In brief, they were light. One of the best of the light plays, "The Faun," where Mr. Knoblauch urged us to do what we liked—eat, love, play, and damn the consequences—would have succeeded probably if it had not been a little too episodic.

The demand for lightness being stated, I pass on to the demand for reality, which I need not dilate on so fully, for it is better satisfied by the intellectuals than the demand for lightness. I do not say that it is entirely satisfied, and certainly do not agree that "The Servant in the House" is as realistic in persons and in situations as, say, "His House in Order." By realism I do not mean flatness: it is not realism to represent on the stage, say, a railway-station, however true to type the rolling-stock and the ticket-collectors may be; nor is it realism

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to have philosophic dialogues between introspective station-masters and epigrammatic goods-guards. True realism lies between these two absurd extremes; it is a visualization of life informed by sympathetic understanding. The common man wants the real person doing the intimate thing; he wants every-day life to be sublimated; he wants its quintessence extracted, its reactions shown, and this in the natural manner of his own back parlour. He wants to see his own intellectual processes, those stifled inarticulate things, exposed to the kindly light of observation, not to the harsh light of dissection. It is hardly irrelevant to say that in this lies the cause of Mr. Shaw's lack of success in Germany and France; in these countries as in this the interested section will have none of unreality, for its own dramatists have served it too well. Such, too, is the fate of most English plays. However great their success may be here, they seldom pass from our shores, while we are

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flooded with French translations and receive in intellectual circles a fair number of German plays.

The finest recent instances of stage realism are evidently "Hindle Wakes" and "Rutherford and Son." In both plays life is represented not as it might be, which would be romance, but as it is. In both the atmosphere is extraordinary; in both the position of woman, alliance, motherhood, responsibility, seriously figure. But there is no strain, there is hardly any preaching; the characters seldom explain themselves, and throughout they reveal themselves. And there is passion, enthusiasm, suffering, and hope—all the things the common men understand.

Every Stage  
a Story

Let us also say a good word for "Typhoon." It was not ill-built, it had no comic relief, but a general air of foreign smartness which carried it; it was neither profound nor shallow, but it gave us a very good idea of the opposite points of view of

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white and yellow men. "Typhoon" is not an Anglicized piece of history, like "The Darling of the Gods," nor is it an intricate (and therefore useless) study of the Japanese temperament; it is a serious attempt to show that a true yellow man cannot gain a woman of the West and a Western soul unless he forfeit his life. A little cheap, it was popular. Popular is the word; it was a sort of "people's reprint," and exactly the thing the people needed. Its success was therefore well earned, for it had realism, not skeleton realism.

Realism in persons and situations, however, demands good scenery and good acting. The intellectual drama is fortunately short of neither. There is no finer scenery in the world than that designed by Mr. Cayley Robinson, Mr. Norman Wilkinson (of Four Oaks), and Mr. Syme; while the talent of such men as Mr. Adrian Stokes, Mr. A. E. John, Mr. Orpen, Mr. J. Pryde,

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Mr. J. D. Fergusson, still waits exploitation. The common man wants good scenery, elaborate scenery: he has no use for Shakespeare save in the Beerbohm Tree (or the Gordon Craig) edition; he has enjoyed "The Tragedy of Nan," "The Blue Bird," "Sumurûn," "Kismet," largely because of their beautiful effects. Thus it is no use offering him the rigidities of Hedda Gabler's interior, nor the affected simplicities of William Poëlism. It may be that Mr. Gordon Craig will satisfy him yet; I do not know. But I do know that the common man wants the glamour of the stage ready made; he has neither the wish nor the capacity to exert his imagination and figure "a sandy place strewn with red sandstone rocks" when he can see naught save obvious lumps of cardboard. That is partly why the common man laughs at opera, at presentations such as "Armide," at the Brock's Benefit which figures the fire-god. I mention acting *en passant*, for the intel-

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lectual drama has brought forward a remarkable body of actors—Mr. Loraine, Mr. Dennis Eadie, Mr. Edmund Gwenn, Miss Dorothy Minto, Miss Cathleen Nesbitt, Miss Edith Goodall, the Abbey Theatre players, etc. But the acting must never be forgotten, for the common man has a rooted habit of saying, not “Have you been to ‘Henry the Fifth?’” but “Have you seen Lewis Waller in ‘Henry the Fifth?’” which is significant.

It is almost superfluous to add that the common man also demands abundance of action and incident. While he is perfectly ready to wade through the static novels of Mr. Galsworthy, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Conrad, he will tolerate no stop on the stage. He loves melodrama, and he loves farce; he does not love discussion, for at once he feels that he is being preached at, becomes shy and hostile like a child compelled to speak a piece in public, and, like the child, he escapes as soon as he can. He wants the

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play to travel, and to travel obviously in a direction which he can perceive. As soon as the characters begin to chatter he is bored. Here is a warning for dramatists: they must give us action, outline characters by their deeds and not by their words, compel them to move on the stage as in life, and not seek the facile asylums of paradox and epigram. But the action must tend in one direction only if the common man is to be reached. It must extract for him from everyday life a constructive theory and a ) ? beautiful theory.

Therein lies the principal difficulty. It is likely that the purely lapidary drama has run its course; for many years and in every country we have been witnessing attacks upon bourgeois habits, family life, the capitalist state, militarism, religion, etc., and we shall doubtless see them continued for many years yet, directed at abuses so long as there are abuses to attack. But the destructive drama has run its course ✓

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in so far as it has prepared the way for the constructive; it has exposed the ugliness of life, its manifold cruelties and stupidities, but in so doing it has had to abandon beauty. There can be beauty in the hideous, even for the normal mind, but it is hard to release it from the ugly shell; Mr. Synge, Mr. Masefield, have succeeded, but the sheer intellectuals such as Ibsen, Gorki, Mirbeau, have failed. Where the Irishman and the West Anglian saw grace in rags the others saw rags alone. I am inclined to maintain that so long as drama is merely destructive, so long will it stand aloof from the beautiful, so long will it be foreign to the common man. Imagine, indeed, what are the feelings of the middle-aged member of the middle class. He is willing, up to a point, to see himself satirized, his views burlesqued, and his most cherished principles controverted; it flatters the latent Pharisee in him to assist unmoved while his class sits in the stocks, for

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it increases his self-esteem, distinguishes him from that class of which he is so strangely proud while so strangely ashamed. But there are limits to his patience, and they are eventually reached; for a while, so long as he is amused, he will tolerate mere destruction, but not long. He will not come again and again to see the same prejudices slain: with him they can be slain but partially, for he holds them obstinately dear; he will do no more than agree that "there may be something in it, but of course it isn't practical," or that "it sounds all right, but things have always been like that," etc. Repeated battering at the doors of the conventions merely bore him because they become stale, and his taste for novelty is nothing short of a craving: the novelty he is in search of is a vision of some other condition where life is neither bitter nor illogical nor unjust. He would not tell you this; he might even say, Kipps-like: "Oo—I dunno," but his

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desire for beauty and beautiful states is exemplified by the success of romantic dramas such as "Monsieur Beaucaire" or the "Scarlet Pimpernel." He likes powder and patches, and duels and elopements, because he likes romance; he would like romance in life—the romance of future conditions; he would like the Socialist or the Feudalist to write him a play where was outlined some suggestion of the projected life-method, the agnostic or the theocrat to show him a society where the new morality held sway, the apostle of free-union to figure for him the bringing about of such a union and the manner of its working. In this wise could we obtain together reality, constructive spirit, and beauty; reality would subsist if we assume future people living as much as we live, and thinking thoughts the expansion and not the distortion of our own. I know that dramas such as these are extremely difficult to build, but I do not doubt that they can

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be built, and it is not for a critic to show how it can be done; when once the work is laid before him it is for him to decide whether it is good, and it is with some diffidence that he lays down rough rules, criticizes, so to speak, *avant la lettre*.

Such is the plea of the common man, the man hedged in with prejudices, whose confined mind perpetually hurtles against the walls of his prison; you must figure him as detached from his conditions and singularly involved in them, as carrying upon his back an immense pack of goods, some of which he thinks valuable, others of which he begins to doubt the worth and yet retains for the sake of old times. Now and then he stops, a little wearily, looks at his impedimenta, and wonders whether all are valuable to him; he tries to discriminate, and cannot; he is suspicious when the stranger denounces some of them; he is waiting for other ideas, other thoughts, a something to substitute, a something new

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and not too new, not of too outrageous a fashion. He is a little pathetic, this wanderer who goes uncertain on his road, too proud to ask for a guide, and yet vaguely wanting one. When the playwright comes, the wanderer will know him and will follow him, dubious and yet pleased, like a lost dog that has found a new master.

## **PLAYS UNPLEASANT**



## PLAYS UNPLEASANT

MR. AYLMER MAUDE reports of Tolstoy a notable saying to the sculptor Ginzburg: "Ah, if our theatre realists could only be got to understand that what is wanted is not to put real babies on the stage or show the real messes they make, but to convey . . . by voice and feature the real feeling that has to be expressed!" The importance of this remark lies in its personal paradox, for Tolstoy was emphatically a realist both in his plays and in his novels. In his plays—especially "The Light that shines in the Darkness," "Fruits of Culture," "The Powers of Darkness," etc.—Tolstoy was a realist in so far as he shrank from nothing of the ugliness that disfigures the lives of moujiks and servants, but he was a great realist because he pictured without

Tolstoy

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melodramatic emphasis the everyday, unconscious life of the well-to-do. Tolstoy was crude, harsh, and unselective in details, not so unselective, perhaps, as Zola or Balzac, but far more so than Flaubert or Ibsen; to be unselective, as these names show, is not an unpardonable crime, it may even not be a blemish, but as we are concerned with the "unpleasant," and as the "unpleasant" mostly resides in details, it is interesting to find Tolstoy, a most ruthless user of the "unpleasant," committed to such a statement as this.

Apparently Tolstoy's theory was that drama should be simplified, placed in the hands of the mime; he held a medium position between the extreme unadorned of Queen's Hall oratorio and Shakespeare in the Beerbohm Tree manner. Presumably his theory of staging (still assuming that the mime controlled the play) would harmonize with that of Mr. F. R. Benson and, to a certain extent, with that of Mr. Gordon

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## PLAYS UNPLEASANT

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Craig. Naturally enough, he did not follow up his theory. In "The Powers of Darkness" especially he used and abused murder, assault, dirt, and brute ignorance; the "unpleasant" detail was paramount; yet Tolstoy urged that "the real baby and the messes it makes" should not be part of the drama. He may have thought these details redundant, but, given the redundancy of detail in all his work, this is not very likely; it is fair to presume that he thought them "unpleasant," that he made in his own mind some obscure distinction between the "unpleasant" and the "necessary." That is the distinction which the ordinary man makes between details, and makes them in an apparently unaccountable manner; while, on the one hand, the ordinary man will crowd to melodrama to witness an unending series of murders, forgeries, and abductions, he does most assuredly take no interest in the ghastly events in "The Powers of Darkness," and,

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if put to the test, would probably avoid "*Oedipus Rex*."

We are therefore driven to the conclusion that in the ordinary man's mind the distinction established between the "pleasant" and the "unpleasant" is less one of fact than of association. He is prejudiced against no particular colour of the spectrum but against certain combinations. Thus, Mr. Cyril Maude made a success of "*She Stoops to Conquer*," where the heroine gains the hero's love by impersonating her own serving-maid; while Mr. St. John Hankin failed to place his "*Cassilis Engagement*" on the "legitimate" because managers thought the public would consider "unpleasant" a mother who induced her son to bring an undesirable fiancée into touch with her friends so that her shortcomings might appear. The distinction is thin, but probably sound, for theatrical managers are not fools. They know, to a certain extent, what the public likes; in

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these cases they knew that the public would laugh at one stratagem and protest against the other. To say that Oliver Goldsmith is Oliver Goldsmith is but partly an argument: Goldsmith is Goldsmith, and the public knows that it ought to like him; but Sophocles is Sophocles, whom every public-school family, and still more every secondary school family, ought to like. But they do not like Sophocles. To them the idea that a man should murder his father and marry his mother is "unpleasant."

Broadly speaking, the bourgeois looks upon all true representations of life as "unpleasant." Thus, while melodramatic crime is popular, such crime as Edgar Allan Poe might have embodied in a play would be unpopular: likewise love as understood by Mr. R. C. Carton is popular, love according to Octave Mirbeau unpopular. It would be easy to multiply such instances a hundredfold, for they cover the whole conflict between intellectual and common-

Carton.

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place drama, but these suffice to show that the primary objection of the bourgeoisie to the "unpleasant" detail is fundamentally an objection to reality. For reality abounds in unpleasant rather than in pleasant things, let romanticists say what they will.

In this country the conflict naturally rages round sex-plays rather than round plays which involve religion or politics. We hesitate to discuss religion on the stage, not only because the Censor will not pass a religious play save in a Sunday-school edition, not only because we fear public violence, but for other reasons which are purely English; I shall make allusion to these farther on, as also to those which militate against political plays. Of these latter we have singularly few — partly, too, because of the Censor, and partly for other and equally English reasons. Indeed, so ground down are political and religious plays that they need be

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mentioned only *à titre de curiosité*; the sex-play it is which the bourgeoisie has singled out for slaughter on the plea of "unpleasantness."

The word "unpleasant" and its brothers "unnecessary," "unwholesome," "unhealthy" are a suspicious family. The juniors appear to be utilitarian, to convey that a play may feed or poison the mind, which is assuredly not an English idea. I believe, though, that they are brought in solely as puritan reinforcements to "unpleasant," their leader, for the English pleasure lust is strong enough to persuade the public to take to any mental food, provided it be . . . pleasant. In the sex-play the "unpleasant" is almost invariably the frank. Take, for instance, "Les Trois Filles de M. Dupont," where is discussed the position of three women, the one unmarried, wretched, and dried up; the second ill-mated and subjected to an ignominious sex-thrall; the third free and disreputable.

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That, in the public view, is an "unpleasant" play. It is not a bad play; it is discursive, but well characterized; it has consecutive situations and solutions—in brief, form. Yet it is a type of the "unpleasant" play. The public looks upon its unblushing exposure of the secrets of the bedroom as disgusting; it does not deny ✓ their truth, but it will not hear them. This is the attitude which prevents the performance of "Mrs. Warren's Profession" and of "Champions of Morality"; the public is agreed to recognize the features of these plays as evils, but it will not allow them to be discussed.

It may here be urged that there is a confusion in my mind between the Censor and the public; I do not maintain that these always see eye to eye, but in the main they are one. The Censor must needs be a time-server, represent the majority, for by this means only can he maintain himself; it is possible that an intellectual sex-play, pro-

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hibited by him, might be very successful if its sex-revelations outweighed its philosophical teaching, but that is beside the point. There is a large public for "revelations" and "exposures"—a public that throws away its paper when it has read the police news; a public that orders three Sunday papers so as to miss nothing; that follows divorce case reports, feeds on exposures of "Secret Cinematograph Shows," "The White Slave Traffic," or "A Catholic's Presents to Actresses." That is a diseased section. It exists, but does not matter. The section that does matter numbers the simple steady millions who labour eight to ten hours a day in office and workshop, who think that Mr. Shaw is an immoral propagandist, and Mr. Wells a hazy personality who writes about flying-machines. Those are the people who object to the sex-play. They object because they have been told to object; they also object because they quite honestly dislike to hear discussed topics

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upon which they feel intimately and with such intensity as they know.

These people have *l'oreille chaste*. Even in domestic crises, such as infidelity or illegitimacy, they tend to reduce discussion to a minimum, and to substitute therefor some simple solution indicated by conventional morality, such as ostracism. It is not wonderful, then, that they will not have discussed *pro forma* that which they will not discuss when it affects them personally; so deep is the feeling that they will not allow a disease a place on the boards, particularly if it in the least affect a sex question: that is the story of a valuable play, "Les Avariés," prohibited in several European countries, and so obviously unsuited to English taste that no licence has been applied for. The plot of "Les Avariés" is well known among the intellectuals; it has been as ruthlessly suppressed in our periodicals as the cognate discovery of "606." What a commentary on the horror

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of the "unpleasant"! It is a ghastly play, most conventionally moral, but it cannot be performed because it reeks of the hospital; it is as unendurable to the public as an afternoon in the operating theatre. In a modified sense this applies to "Hedda Gabler," performed, but a failure: "Hedda Gabler" is esoteric, which would damn it, but it is also a study in neurasthenia. Thus it is an "unpleasant" play. In the same group is "Esther Waters," one of whose scenes—the baby-farm—has been pronounced by several of those critics who represent the feeling of the commonplace person to be a blot on the play. Well, the "blot" is not one of form; it consists in this—that everybody knows that baby-farms exist, but hardly anybody likes to have them thrust before his eyes; that is Ruskin's story of Dives and Lazarus. What the public will not tolerate is the shock to its self-complacent certainty that these dreadful things only happen in the papers.

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The mental reactions of the opponent of "unpleasant" details are, however, more complex. They do embrace self-indignant satisfaction and brain slumber rudely disturbed, but they are rooted in fear and in shyness of the mind—a shyness far from modest. The opponent considers that it is bad enough for evil to exist without it being talked about, and he believes that to talk about it will intensify instead of mending it. That is the root of the horror of the "unpleasant"; it is together self-protective and racially instinctive. On the one hand we have a feeling similar to that of the male opponent of woman's suffrage who cannot fight the case against the vote, but ingenuously says: "Yes, but where do I come in?" On the other, we have the belief that the discussion of evils tends to spread them by arousing curiosity in the minds of the young. The chaste-eared do not consider whether an evil should be analyzed within one act or eight, whether

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full discussion is useful and incomplete discussion noxious; they prefer to assume that all discussion is harmful and that it should be buried. Thence spring the opposition to the physiological education of the young, the library and dramatic censorship, the cloaking of all dangers connected with sex. It is an unreasoning opposition, and it is not prepared to reason, this because it is not conscious of its own impulses; the more elementary the workings of a mind, the more inarticulate the tongue, as all know who have had to deal in politics or social service with the low-grade brain.

An evidence of this state of mind is found in the eight music-hall inspections effected by the London County Council during the year ending November 29, 1911. In four cases—"The Girl who lost her Honeymoon," "Rialon," "The Dawn of Love," and "Ular Api's" dance—the committee intervened, caused modifications to be introduced into the plays, and prohibited the

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dance. With this goes the joyful stratagem of a Northern municipality, who caused "The Girl who lost her Character" and "The Girl who went Astray" to be *performed* as "The Girl who lost—" and "The Girl who went—". In the North the chastity of the ear was manifest, for the plays were performed under these highly salacious titles for which the management had to thank a kindly Council; in the South the alleged salacious detail was excised, but the titles were maintained. In the South there was fear for the race; in the North there was fear and shyness combined.

But the pranks of shyness are not restricted to sex questions. They extend to the economic bases of society, to politics and to religion. Thus, "Justice," a social and therefore a political play, failed because it harrowed, because it was "unpleasant" to see the convict in his cage, while it was not at all "unpleasant" (indeed, rather

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comforting for the householder) to know him to be in a cage. The position of the public was that of the murderer who, in the ancient story, was driven mad by being bound and laid in an open coffin side by side with his victim. But "Justice" was no exception: "The Weavers," because it represents poverty; "Pains and Penalties," because it places a King in the stocks; "The Playboy of the Western World," because it does not confine its analysis to an individual, but slings at a nation—all these have been either censored, ignored, or mobbed. I do not here refer to the arrest of the "Playboy's" company on a charge of having performed an obscene play, for this decision is American and very funny. But we must remember that "The Playboy" was hooted by those who understood it: they, as ordinary men, felt in its presence not hatred but fear, as the English bourgeois and the German bourgeois respectively felt fear in presence of "Justice"

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and "The Weavers." The latter was supported by the German lower middle classes, the former by nobody; but that is another question—that of the attitude of another class. The English are consistent in objecting to political as well as to sex-plays; they are afraid that the virus of a new idea —this thing, according to Pobiedonostzeff more powerful than dynamite—might infect the young generation.

This they also feel with regard to religion. If "Salome" is not performed, it is because the English as a race invest religion with sanctity; that is the peculiar reason to which I alluded in the early part of this essay. Though agnostics are not lacking and Laodiceans a national majority, the English seem to think that they must keep their hands off religion in general and the Christian religion in particular.\* Indeed, they respect that which they despise, and,

\* See the last Essay in this volume, "Religious Drama."

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in a delicious spirit of paradox, believe that which they disbelieve. If this were not so, the blasphemy laws, in virtue of which several men are to-day in gaol, would long since have been abolished: it is because the English are shy and fearful that they have left them untouched. It must not, however, be thought that the dislike for the “unpleasant” is purely English. The “unpleasant” is strangely local and temporary; it is as fluid and as artificial as morals themselves. Thus, a good play exposing the evils of polygamy would interest nobody in this country, but it might produce a revolution in Turkey, while its success in Wyoming and Idaho would be immense; likewise *Hernani*, which created a disturbance in Paris in 1830, is to-day voted so old-fashioned as to be suitable only for the Comédie Française. And an anti-French play, which would have been as successful as an “Englishman’s Home” a week after Fashoda, would to-day be voted in bad taste.

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It may therefore be said, to sum up, that the horror of "unpleasant" is a horror of reality due to the desire to represent love as sexless, religion as a natural tendency, and politics as a party rag. It lives in the darkness of a mind akin a little to that of primitive man, a creature much as the beast, fearful of larger animals and of the light. But the intellectuals should not be baffled by obstacles such as these, nor, let it be said to their credit, which is not great, are they so as a rule. Indeed, it is good to think that they know the "unnecessary" to be the necessary and the "unwholesome" to be the wholesome. A view such as this naturally rests on the assumption that the intellectuals are a testing ground, and that they are perfectly willing to be shocked, disgusted, or bored by plays and their details. Financially, intellectual plays fail for a variety of reasons, largely owing to their technical faults; but this is failure from the popular

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point of view with which I am not here concerned.

While agreeing that the "unpleasant" must be excised for the benefit of the common man, I do not agree that it must be held back from the intellectuals. Some of the bases of this opinion are incidentally outlined in the foregoing, particularly the view, abhorred of the romanticists, that the "unpleasant" and the "ugly" are mostly the true. This because even in the finer lives much of the beautiful is really pseudo-beautiful; it may appear that such a play as "*Monsieur Beaucaire*" is a picture of graceful, careless lives, where no work is done, where the arts are fostered, and where culture blends with lofty sentiment into nobility of soul. But under the powder and the patches lies a rough surface: the *Monsieur Beaucaire* system is nothing but lace on a wound. Behind the gentlemen are the churls; behind their pride is arrogance; behind their women's grace is

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the callousness which, in reply to the churls' cry for bread, says: "Let them eat cake." Even in beauty ugliness lurks; there is no beauty absolute, just as there may be no ugliness absolute; thus, there is no reality without ugliness—without, in other words, the "unpleasant."

But the "unpleasant" in drama plays a greater part than merely that of a showman. Though such playwrights as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Synge tend to exhibit rather than to discuss, their action is as subtly destructive as the slaughtersome methods of Mr. Brieux, Mr. Bernard Shaw, and Mr. Hauptmann are obviously destructive. They introduce into the mental reaction of their audience an irritant, the conflict of which with the counter-irritant of public opinion creates a product which may be called the first proof of a new public opinion. Just as the "pleasant" soothes and stupefies, the "unpleasant" exasperates; while it is the great and ruthless

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light turned on the state of the world, the ventilator of wrongs (to use an unpleasant but handy phrase), in the familiar shape of "Oliver Twist" and "Odd Women," it is also the prop of Reaction. When, for instance, Tolstoy preaches in "The Light that shines in the Darkness," a new, or rather a real Christian morality, in virtue of which the rich must beggar themselves and suffer wrong at the hands of the poor, he automatically nerves to opposition those who hold the wealth of the world, just as the electoral triumph of democracy of the polls drives the desperate ruling classes into war. It is the "unpleasant" opens the debate; without its help there is no debate.

Naturally the "unpleasant" does not provoke controversy unless it shocks self-complacency; it must therefore be very "unpleasant," almost revolting. Otherwise it does not attain its ends. Such plays as "Loaves and Fishes," for instance, well-meant and well calculated to expose

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social stupidity, do not provoke discussion because they fight with buttons on the foils; so long as self-complacency can note with equanimity that it has been hit there is nothing done, but the case is very different when "Major Barbara" splendidly punctures this thick self-esteem. If I ask anything for the intellectual drama—and it cannot be repeated too often that this demand is not addressed to playwrights who wish also to please the common man—it is for cruder detail yet. There can be nothing too "unpleasant" for the true intellectuals, or, if there be, this means that a playwright can help the intellectuals to progress by sowing dissension in their midst and causing a new "intellectual opinion" to emerge from the welter of their ideas.

Lastly—and this is no small consideration if drama is to remain drama—the "unpleasant" is richer in situations, more capable than the pleasant of creating plots.

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A play without hypocrisy, selfishness, cruelty, or greed must be a half-toned affair, and can command the support neither of the intellectuals nor of the common men. The tragic tradition of Sophocles and the comic tradition of Aristophanes are both based on the same idea—that by inducing withdrawal from, or contempt for, a state of things, human passions can be stirred. It is not therefore an exaggeration to say that the playwright can hardly go too far in accumulating horror upon horror's head, provided his work has reality. Given the factor of reality, there can be no undue elaboration of the "unpleasant"; while the murder of the Ambassador by the Prime Minister in "*The Price of Peace*" is ridiculous because Prime Ministers do not do these things, the suicide of William Falder in "*Justice*" and that of the heroine in "*Mid-Channel*" are fine because clerks and women do do these things. Thus, while the murder on the stage is so absurd

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as to make it redundant, the suicides on the stage are essential, however much they may shock and harrow, because they are realities. Likewise the murder in "Within the Law" is quite normal.

It may incidentally be urged, from the purely intellectual point of view, that the merit of the "unpleasant" is that the bourgeoisie does not like it. This is an empiric argument to which Ibsen may have attached more weight than it deserved when saying that the man alone was the strong man, and that the majority was always wrong. The bourgeoisie is not always wrong; as a judge of technique, it is always right, for it quite clearly imposes upon works that purport to be art that first condition of art—form. But because the bourgeoisie is a judge of form, it does not follow that it is a judge of thought; its canons of technique must bind the advanced drama, but its canons of intellect must be flouted. For there can be no advanced

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drama unless there be revolt; the very adjective requires it; with this certainty in their mind and a proper discrimination between the audiences to which they address themselves, there is therefore no reason why the intellectual playwrights should shrink from any detail, however "unpleasant" it may be pronounced. All things are ingredients to their hands, and to refuse to use them would be a sacrilegious denial of the universality of art.



## **RELIGIOUS DRAMA**



## RELIGIOUS DRAMA

THERE are many forbidden things. Every society, class, and latitude has its version of the seemly, and readily dubs with the word "irreverent" any flouting of the taboo; but, curiously enough, those things which are forbidden in this land are not forbidden in that, and activities which once availed themselves of liberty now seek to live by favour of licence . . . while the licence of the past, sheltered by some broadening liberalism, walks unashamed and perhaps regretting a little its old alienage. It was not untruthfully Chrysis told Demetrios that there were dances one dared not dance; yet, to-day, she would dance them at the Palace. The boundary of her courage was her reverence, that obscure mixture of adoration and fear which holds

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back man from what he could do if he would, and yet could not do, even with the favour of the law, because he staggers under the weight of unspoken words—words that might be spoken when begotten by the secret reverence of his fellows.

It is reverence, then, has shrouded in many places and for many centuries those things which lie nearest to us—our relations to God, to our fatherland, to woman and the home she makes. The less we understood and the more we revered, the greater our ignorance and the greater was our withdrawal into ourselves, the louder our cry that there were dances one dared not dance, until it became almost possible to say that faith was a belief in things which one knew to be untrue. But as we began to understand war, first as a rivalry of Princes, then as a sensation for the newspapers, and at last as a game organized by armament firms, patriotism grew less mysterious, became fit to be discussed. As

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psychology, pathopsychology,\* and eugenics gained credit, we ceased to swathe the love of woman in rosy mists, we laid hands upon her, the family, and the home. In literature especially, and a little in the drama, we grew bolder, ceased to make excuses for infidelity, because we were no longer prepared to accept with closed eyes the holiness of the marriage bond; we cast doubts upon the existence of family happiness and upon the justifications of paternal authority; we threw into one vast melting-pot the sex-conventions with those of society and of the economic State. So that to-day many thralls have been removed, that the Björnsons, the Strindbergs, the Galsworthys may say very much what they like, provided they do not touch our religious beliefs.

That is the last prohibition. Religion must not be stood in the cockpit, perhaps lest it fall, perhaps because its dignity is so

\* Notably in the plays of Strindberg.

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great as to disqualify it from mortal combat. As a great concession, religion may be discussed in books: the Public Prosecutor stays his hand from "Robert Elsmere" and "L'Empreinte," but the drama must remain dumb. Subject to a few exceptions consecrated by custom, such as morality plays—"Everyman" and "Eagerheart"; subject to caprice and trust in Sir Herbert Tree, as exemplified in the licensing of "Joseph and his Brethren," the prohibition is absolute. It is the Lord Chamberlain's duty to Burke the discussion upon the stage of any religious topic. He bases his action upon the very real and deep feeling of the many, that any religious discussion is an irreverent discussion; this is in Great Britain a puritanical rather than a political feeling, and it has a poetic quality which is very well expressed by Mr. William Poel:\*

\* Interview by Mr. Harold Begbie, *Daily Chronicle*, September 3, 1913.

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"I do not believe in the future of religious plays. I have come to see that their tendency is dangerous. Religion can never be acted. It is too real and personal a thing. It is too precious, too sacred. A player may act another man's ambition, cupidity, passion, what you will, but he cannot act another man's religion. An acted religion is of all insincere and odious things the most insincere, the most odious. And the tendency of such plays is towards sentimentalism and claptrap, which are blasphemous in conjunction with religion."

This shows that Mr. Poel establishes a scale, that he looks upon ambition, cupidity, passion, and everything else as pariah topics, while religion stands alone and Brahmanic. While accepting art as the mirror of life, he submits that certain things must not be reflected; briefly, here is the dance that no one dare dance. But some dare dance it, and that is the weakness of those who object to the religious play. Not

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only are the white Christians a minority in the world, but they conceal within their fold many professed agnostics and millions, perhaps a majority of persons whom religion does not interest, who are "religious" because they are superstitious. They cannot be shocked, for they do not care, and they can very properly retort to the reverent that they see no reason why religion should not be discussed, while very good reasons can be given why it should. They can argue in the first place that a religious play need not be an irreverent play; they can more powerfully argue that they must not, as open-minded people, be deprived of an opportunity to become interested in a subject which the Churches have failed to make vital to them.

Certainly, if we examine the religious plays, which are not very many, the rebel case is very strong. When, in "*The Showing Up of Blanco Posnet*," Elder Daniels thanks God that selling drink pays him,

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the faithful are shocked. Yet they are not shocked at the idea of Harvest Thanksgiving. The parallel is absolute, but the peasant is assumed to be a fine fellow, the liquor-seller a hypocrite; also it is assumed that one reaches heaven more easily by selling potatoes than by selling whisky. Those assumptions are, of course, false, and they rest very largely upon the language the dramatist employs. An entirely absurd idea prevails that all references to the Deity must be couched in the inflated language of the early seventeenth century: that is ridiculous. It is quite as easy to be devout in American slang as in Latin or in Jamesian English. When Blanco Posnet reluctantly and almost angrily accepts God, he says: "He's a sly one. He's a mean one. He lies low for you. He plays cat and mouse with you. He lets you run loose until you think you're shut of Him, and then, when you least expect it, He's got you." This is not irreverent. No reasonable person can

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expect a cowboy hedonist, a poetic scallywag such as Blanco to express himself otherwise; he is saying substantially the same thing as the Fifth Jew in "Salome": "No one can tell how God worketh. His ways are very dark." Blanco is not irreverent; indeed, he is passionately reverent, he is vanquished, he has faith. Those who do not understand this are stupid people, therefore people who have no rights.

Irreverence, however, which is generally alleged against religious plays, is alleged against the nature of the subject rather than against its treatment. While it may well be that the stupid faithful suffer when Blanco confesses his faith in Californian terms, they cannot suffer when this faith is proclaimed in would-be beautiful language in the midst of a beautiful setting. That is the case of "*Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*," which is not performed in English; it is not a seductive play—it is often

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pompous, and its words are less than its idea—but it is saturated with a reverence that is throughout passionate. The story of the Archer of the Lord, who, inflamed by the sight of the martyrs, confessed his faith and suffered a glad death at the hands of his fellow-archers, is noble and poetic; in every line of the play the breath of worship blows tempestuous. The saint recalls the miracles, the message of Christ that he should come with Him, behold the hands of Lazarus swathed in their bands; he spies hearts; by teaching the slaves to suffer and to die, he enables them to be born again; he bursts into a terrific pæan of adoration when confronted with the woman sick of the fevers: “I salute thee. I bow down to thee. I attest my Hope, I attest eternal Love. By the blood that dyeth, by the tear that washeth, and by all these free souls and by all these men enslaved, upon my knees I pray to thee”; and at last he stands rapt before His shroud, that is all

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soiled with the blood from His wounds and with funereal ointments.

Sebastian, his soul winging towards the Lord, dying because he does not die, is not irreverent. Those he shocks are less reverent than him; they are terrified by the intensity of his passion; they cannot bear his love lest they might have themselves to love more than they can bear. And, again, they shrink from "Salome," from Jokanaan, terribly denouncing Herodias: "Where is she who gave herself unto the Captains of Assyria, who have baldricks on their loins, and crowns of many colours on their heads? . . . Go, bid her rise up from the bed of her abominations, from the bed of her incestuousness, that she may hear the words of him who prepareth the way of the Lord, that she may repent her of her iniquities. Though she will not repent, but will stick fast in her abominations; go, bid her come, for the fan of the Lord is in His hand." They shrink, even though the

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Baptist sublimate all that is heroic in inspired chastity; but here it is not irreverence shocks—it is reverence, it is passion. The cry is not for reverence—it is for tepidity, for a heavy secrecy that shall shroud the fearful from revelation.

So assured am I that there can be no irreverence in the religious play we know that not even "*The Next Religion*" will I adjudge to its enemies. When Mr. Zangwill causes his schismatic to scoff at "angels, squalling saints, Golden Floor," to call them "played-out stage properties," he does not sneer at the essence of religion, but criticizes merely its outer trappings; he states the point of view of one whose mind is fixed on essentials. The objectors must be ready to face the reproach that they lay stress on ritual rather than on dogma. It is true that these allusions to the Christian implements of worship may offend, but it is not proven that they should offend. And one might carry the argument to its logical

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extreme—point out that, the essence of Christianity being humility, its votaries should call for purifying insult and pain ! There is no reason either to confine the discussion to Christianity; logically enough, the performance of a play dealing with Mahomet was not allowed, nor, in given circumstances, that of “The Mikado.”\* But plays introducing the worship of Rome and Greece are very common, and are not objected to, which leads one to think that the mind of the reverent opposition is rather clouded.

The truth is that reverence is an instinct felt even by the irreligious, that few unbelievers will desecrate a church, and that our latter-day Laodiceans cannot yet free themselves from the tradition of religious worship which runs through their blood. The costumes of the priesthood, the scented silence of the churches, the sumptuous

\* Political prohibition, but the Mikado, victor of the Shogun, is a religious head, a theocrat.

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words of the services, impress without convincing them. Hence their supine attitude and their acceptance of the proposition that religion must be sheltered. Whether it should be sheltered is very doubtful. If all men believed, the case would have a basis, but as they do not I fail to see why one may insult a man because he is a Liberal, while one may not insult him because he is a Christian. And as one may insult the Christian in books and newspapers and on the public platform, subject to cautious evasion of the blasphemy laws, the proposition that one may not do so on the stage must logically fall to the ground; if it is to be maintained in the face of logic, then a discussion on Welsh Disestablishment is sacrilegious, and we must beware lest we pronounce the word "curate."

Religion cannot pretend to a shelter which is not accorded to politics, morals, art, a little because it uses intellectual weapons to repel intellectual attacks, but

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mainly because religion is not universal. If but one man in the world proclaimed himself an agnostic, he would be entitled to air his views, and to prevent him from so doing in any way he chose would be a negation of the civilized idea. The minority may not always be right, but it is always entitled to state its case. If we do not admit this, then the religious idea must entirely disappear from the theatre; "The Gates of Morning" and "The Eldest Son" must lose their licences because they show up in mean lights, the one a Nonconformist preacher, the other an Anglican priest.

The prohibition rests, then, upon a misconception of the idea of reverence, upon the puritanical view to which I shall allude farther on that the less one talks of a thing the more one loves it—a thoroughly Round-head idea. It is an incorrect idea, for art cannot offend, and it is a foolish idea because religious drama is a revivalistic agent. Art cannot offend the people who under-

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stand it, and those who do not understand it do not matter: this is an artisocratic point of view, but we cannot think of democracy and art together. Therefore, to take an extreme case, no objection could be held by the sentient sincere to the religious dances of Salome and of Saint Sebastian. It may be argued that the dance of Salome, partnered with the head of the Baptist, is a disgusting, voluptuous exhibition, but, quite apart from the fact that Miss Maud Allan has given the performance in public some hundreds of times, which opens a ~~rift~~ in the Puritan case—apart also from the prevalence of religious dancing in the Bible in which Kings did not hesitate to join, the reverent must accept the dance as historical. If the Baptist did live and if he was beheaded, if Salome did dance, there is no reason why we should be deprived of the spectacle, however horrible it may be; if the Baptist is a fiction, there is no reason why the legend should be hidden in the

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dusty tabernacle of popular superstition. This dilemma applies also to the dance of St. Sebastian.

In the third act of "*Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*" the archer practically dances the Passion; his movements and his attitudes are ritual. But here, as in *Salome*, we have a religious passion phrased through the passion of art. His appeal and the up-thrust of his soul towards his revealed God are embalmed in the superb of his words. Even though Mr. D'Annunzio never attains to the splendour with which Oscar Wilde dowers Herod tempting *Salome* with treasure, he rises to a pitch that must transcend criticism: he cannot offend those who understand. He can do more: he can stimulate, proselytize, for he can draw from the indifferent and the dull those sparks that are waiting to be drawn. He is no Owen Roberts appealing to the soul through the emotion of superstition, but another whose appeal rests upon the emotion of

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art. Should the devout object? Does not the end justify the means? And what matters what road man travels towards his salvation if he be convinced that the road he has chosen is meet for his temperament?

I cannot believe that religious drama is aught save revivalistic in effect. This is obvious in the case of the morality plays, for they arouse even in the heart of the infidel a feeling of reverence that may be the ancestor of a desire for faith. Leaving aside "Everyman," it is clear that no Theosophist could be offended by Mr. Clifford Bax's "The Marriage of the Soul," where a woman sacrifices love for Osiris to find love within Him, while the heathen (in this case the Christians) may be stimulated to inquiry. Again, the late Mrs. Alfred Lyttelton's "Dame Julian's Window" must compel us to regard ourselves and consider how we face temptation; while "Joseph and his Brethren"—that cheap, vulgarized, and stagey version of a fine Bible

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story—must have almost the same effect. For the human soul is as a still pool that containeth many fishes. Much more notable, however, than these pale and tolerated flowers of impulse are the prohibited plays, Mr. Maeterlinck's "*Marie Magdeleine*" and the immortal "*Passion Play*." Christ does not appear in the Belgian poet's work, but over the amazed, scoffing, or frightened throng of Romans, slaves, and converts He hangs awful and enormous; He raises Lazarus, sends him as a messenger to the fair sinner, draws her out of her materialistic mire and up into the beatitudes. Though the soldiers guffaw and the philosophers argue, He remains a pantheon and a voice eloquently calling. It is impossible to sit through "*Marie Magdeleine*" without feeling at one's heart the tug of an emotion that may be purely artistic, but which must infallibly turn thought towards the extra-human. It may not endure; the grain may fall by the wayside,

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be devoured of the fowls of the air, or upon stony places where there is but little deepness of earth. But the parable admits of richer soils.

Of the “Passion Play” I will say little, for it is well known; but I should like to argue in its defence, that it can stand of itself, cannot be irreverent, and must stimulate. For I saw it, not in the heroic valley of Ober-Ammergau, but in a booth at the Foire de Neuilly, near Paris, set among the cockshies and the roundabouts; played by illiterate supers in the midst of tawdry properties, it rose up in its own majesty. Though all about it was the merry-making of the crowd, though the laughter of coarse lovers and the hoarse voices of drunkards pierced the canvas walls, its appeal did not fail. Indeed, its humanity was intensified by the warm neighbourhood of the revellers; and, contrariwise, its humanity was withdrawn infinitely far, so sharply did it stand in contrast. That night, begging those

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who saw to think of the morrow and of eternity, the "Passion Play" offered itself to all the blind mouths.

But the revivalistic spirit has more than one edge. It may woo and it may stimulate; it may make faith by exasperating. A purely sceptical play such as "*The Next Religion*"—sceptical, that is, not from the religious but from the Christian point of view—does no damage to religion. Certainly, when Mr. Zangwill, alluding to the God of Abraham, stigmatizes the patriarch as a Mesopotamian polygamist, when he causes the vicar's wife to remind her husband that his drunken cook has an immortal soul, or the blacksmith to gloat over thoughts of souls in hell as sparks fly from his anvil, he may exasperate Christians. And they may resent the juxtaposition of contradictory texts, clamour for a more liberal exegesis; they may be angered by the suggestion that Christianity has no monopoly of salvation, that it is only "the

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next religion in Africa." Well, it is very good that they should be angered and pained, quite apart from the value of mortification to which I have already referred; these attacks, these propositions, in virtue of which Christianity is naught save the invention of those who are afraid to die, do not shake the stalwarts of the Church. Far from it; they give quality to their faith, because they can maintain it after it has been attacked. Who would have faith in the temper of steel that had not been tested? Yet that is exactly the attitude of those who bid Mr. Zangwill get behind them; they refuse to see him; can it be that they fear to fall?

The reply may be that the weak may fall. Then let them fall. The weak should be destroyed, unless we are to lower the quality of religion by condoning their ignorant obsequiousness and their fraudulence. The aggressive, heterodox play performs exactly a double service: it heartens the strong in

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faith by compelling into action their pugnacious instincts, those instincts for which stands Ferrovius,\* the fighter who cannot be meek; it sifts out from among the mass the indifferent, the mechanical worshippers who are nothing but waste matter, sheer degenerate tissue which impairs the health of the faith.

When Herod, in "Salome," alludes to "an unknown God," when in "Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien" the Romans express their hatred of the Gentiles and their fear of the Christians, shrink from "the stink of lilies" which delights the nostrils of the regenerate, it is for the true Christians to rise up in defence of their faith, and to show by the growth of their passion that their faith is true. They cannot afford to shut their ears to temptation; I will not revive an ancient controversy by suggesting that God is the Father of sin, but I venture to suggest that if an omnipotent Being has

\* "Androcles and the Lion."

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created all things nothing can be alien to anything. The world must be taken as a whole, and the fine man must select.

But how can he select if no selection is laid before him ? How can he be orthodox if no heterodoxy ever confronts him ? It is important that in "Androcles and the Lion" the Romans should express the view that the Christians are the lowest of the low, ill-bred and ungentlemanly; it is important to consider ("Next Religion") whether Christ was an orthodox Christian; it is important that in "Le Cloitre" Mr. Verhaeren should force us to see that human passion may be transmuted into religious passion and *vice versa*, that devout priests may intrigue when a new abbot has to be chosen. All this wind of doubt and heresy; all this human, rebellious stuff that strives against the extra-human, that denies God a blind faith—all this is tonic. I repeat, because it is vital to my argument, that the Christian must stand battery.

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For a very large question arises: if religion cannot stand battery, can it stand at all? Can it be more than an embalmed corpse? It is not irreverent to suggest in answer that the theory of the survival of the fittest applies to creeds as to men. The noble creeds, Christianity, Buddhism, Brahmanism, Mohammedanism, stand, and have stood longer than the creeds of Rome and Greece; they expel fetishism when confronted with it; they bear schism, and yet stand. In our particular case—that of Christianity—the edifice cannot crumble if it be founded upon a Rock; if it crumbles, then it cannot be so founded, but it should be the pride of the Church to be attacked. I imagine a Church more arrogant than this, medieval, more militant, welcoming aggression and insult, serene and secure in its consciousness that no human thing can harm it. For the creed must tower; it must not live on sufferance. It must be the vehicle of high romance. Earthly

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romance, as we generally understand it, is nothing but artifice; you cannot find romance in a costume play any more than you can find it if you go and look for it in the fields or the slums; such a search is self-conscious. But you can find it in the inspiration of a creed or in the drama that embodies it; while human romance generally deals with dead states, religious romance deals with possible states. It can *be* with us, as it *was* with us, and *will* be with us.

What is the enemy, then? Given that in Latin countries objection is seldom raised to the performance of a religious play, one is induced to conclude that Puritanism is at the root of the attitude. The Puritan is not, as the Catholic, willing to put his faith to the test because his creed appears based less on faith than on reason. I do not impugn his faith: it is probably clearer and more closely related to his life than is the Catholic faith, but it is in intimate touch with his brain; it is a faith to be defended

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with good reasons, not one to be passionately espoused. There are no spiritual weddings among the Puritans. This intellectual attitude induces fear in the breast of the worshipper; that which his brain defends another brain can attack and destroy: he cannot afford to take the risk. When the Protestant Alliance writes to the King, asking him not to be present at a performance of "The Woman of Samaria" at the Coliseum because all the spectators may not be believers, it is voicing that particular fear. Fear should not be the basis of religion, but love; it is not fear makes worship glad, joyous, whole-hearted—it is confidence, self-dedication, and a broad humanity, a sense that the joy of life is Divine. It is only fair to mention that a strong liberal movement is developing in England; the performance of "Joseph and his Brethren" is a good sign; it would cheer the heart of Charles Jeremiah Wells, who tried in vain to produce a similar

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drama in the early part of the nineteenth century; and among the storm of criticism levelled at "Androcles and the Lion," the strong voices of the Rev. R. J. Campbell and the Rev. Thomas Yates have been raised in approval. No objection was raised to "Magic," which would, I think, have created a rather unwarranted disturbance if it had been produced ten years ago. "Parsifal" has been staged, and Mr. Walter Stephens has obtained licences for the performance and film display of "Paradise Lost," "The Pilgrim's Progress," and Tolstoy's "Work While You Have Light." But it is worth noting that Mr. Stephens did not readily obtain his licences from the Lord Chamberlain; there was great argument, much correspondence; the dramatic version of "Paradise Lost" was published in book form as a sort of appeal to the public, and at last, in a grudging, fearful spirit, the authorities granted the licences.

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But this conduct of the Lord Chamberlain's office does not constitute a precedent. It may to-morrow refuse to license a play founded on the life of Samson or St. Anthony; the old fear remains, the old, half-superstitious prejudice. All that can be said is that here and there Puritanism is giving way, perhaps like Mr. Grundy, in Tono-Bungay, trying "to see no harm in it," perhaps broadening under the pressure of intellectual enlightenment. That is not quite the way in which one would wish it to broaden; it would be better for Puritanism to become prouder, more careless of the purely human; but the end justifies the means enough for us not to quarrel with the line followed by the new movement. We shall yet have a stage as free as the pulpit, and the pulpit will do an ungracious thing if it does not wish it an extreme development of its emotional influence.

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BY W. L. GEORGE

# A BED OF ROSES

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## A BED OF ROSES

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